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AUTHOR Schmuck, Patricia A.; Schmuck, Richard A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that consisted of interviews with 38 elementary school principals in 21 Western and Midwestern states. The sample was made up of 27 men and 11 women with an age range of 35 to 64, all of whom worked in small-town schools. The paper describes the various challenges faced by these principals, including academic deficits, children's emotional needs, public demands for higher achievement, decreasing financial resources, and staff improvement needs. Specific case descriptions are offered to illustrate current realities and some exemplary practices for boosting student motivation, teacher improvement, and increasing staff involvement. Some outstanding programs described include: (1) a cooperative approach among administrators, teachers, parents, and students to improve classroom discipline; (2) a home-centered parent education program; (3) low-cost teacher inservice training; (4) teacher peer coaching; and (5) a staff decision-clarification procedure. It is concluded that too many principals continue to work ineffectively in the face of the frustrations to be found in rural schools. A small number of administrators, however, are able to cope successfully with their challenges by using more innovative and democratic approaches to leadership. (TES)

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PRINCIPALS of SMALL-TOWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: Coping with Student Motivation, Teacher Improvement, and Staff Involvement

Patricia A. Schmuck
Lewis & Clark College

Richard A. Schmuck
University of Oregon

At first glance, it could appear idyllic to be the principal of a small-town elementary school. After all, who is admired and respected more by those delightful kindergartners than their idol, the principal? A walk down the hallway is accompanied by greetings with hugs and students eager to show off their latest accomplishments.

Imagine it! With eight years of successful classroom teaching and two years of administrative certification courses under your belt, you take over a cozy, little school set off on a pastoral knoll of live oaks in a quiet neighborhood with green lawns, friendly neighbors, and well-kept homes just a few blocks away from the downtown square which dates back to the turn of the century.

Your competent staff of 16 teachers, secretary, custodian, two cooks and three aids operates like a close-knit family. The supportive superintendent visits you now and then to tell you what a splendid job you are doing. The helpful and pleasant parents, 90% of whom are actively engaged in the school, support yours and the teachers' efforts. The well-behaved students, secure in their families and in their community, work diligently on their assignments in school and at home. Their joyous laughter often rings through the school's orderly hallways.

With such ideal portraits of small-town elementary schools in the backs of our minds, we sought to discover what principals' work lives are really like by talking with and observing them in action across the United States. In a nutshell, what we found were not idyllic pedagogical portraits of charming simplicity. Rather, we found that the principals' challenges were legion and their day-to-day problems were multiple even in what were apparently ideal settings for elementary education.

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The Study

On Sabbatical leave from our Oregon-based educational programs for school administrators, we set out on January 2, 1989, in a 22-foot recreational vehicle, traveling 9,452 miles in just over five months to visit 25 small-town districts in 21 states west of Ohio. We visited K-12 districts serving incorporated towns with between 480 and 2,000 students. We required that the districts were more than 75 miles away from a major college of education to avoid districts with practice teachers and university researchers or consultants.

We interviewed 38 elementary principals, each for over an hour, shadowed them for parts of two days, and observed them in meetings with their superintendents and teachers. We also interviewed some teachers in the elementary schools about their perceptions of the principal's leadership style.

Our sample of 38 elementary principals was made up of 27 men and 11 women (including two female elementary assistant principals and one female head teacher). There were only two members of a minority, both Black men residing in the deep South. The mean age for the men was 48 and for the women 43. The age range for all 38 principals was from 35 to 64. Over 50% of the principals were raised in the local area; only nine - seven men and two women - were born out of state. On the average, the men had served as a principal for about 10 years, whereas the women had served six years. Seventeen men but no woman had been coaches. Only three men and one woman had been principal of another school. A different three men and one woman were supervising more than one staff.

Because the literature tends to emphasize the complexities of being an urban or suburban principal, we wondered if principals in small towns would experience their job differently. Would small-town principals, for example, face fewer challenges, less conflict and have a simpler worklife than their urban and suburban counterparts? Would small-town principals have different leadership styles from their counterparts?

Although life in the small town clearly is different from life in urban and suburban settings, we found that principals of schools in small towns face significant challenges and difficulties of their own. Moreover, they appear to be no more democratic or no more autocratic than their urban counterparts.

Challenges and Exemplary Practices

Even though elementary principals of small-town schools do not encounter some of the social problems posed by the urban environment, such as drugs or crime on the school grounds, they do face a multitude of administrative problems. Everywhere, being a successful elementary principal requires a juggling act. The principals must juggle the academic deficits and emotional needs of children from broken families against the demands of a public outcry for higher student achievement. They must strive to upgrade the quality of classroom teaching, while at the same time they try to soothe the battered egos of their teachers beleaguered by pressing state mandates for change, decreasing financial resources and threatening allegations about their lack of competence. They must manage the school's meager resources efficiently while they calm the frustrations of staff members who have not received a significant pay raise in years.

Let's listen to how the principals themselves see it.

Challenge #1: Student Motivation, Current Realities

--"We just have a different student population nowadays. They don't get as much support at home as they used to."

--"Parents don't seem to care about their kids today. They don't care if the homework gets done or not. They aren't on top of what their kids are doing, either academically or socially."

--"We encourage parents to read aloud to their child, but some can't, their life is too dysfunctional and they can't help their child."

--"We need to work on self-esteem of the students and the parents. Unfortunately quite a few adults in this town don't have much self respect."

--"We need to recognize the Native-Americans more. These poor children are in a very vulnerable situation. We need to recognize their culture and give more respect to it. We need to get more Native-American parents involved."

Elementary principals in small towns face families unable to adapt in a downwardly spiraling economy, families

which are not helping their children respond productively to teachers' expectations. And in some of the small towns we visited, the special needs of minority students exacerbate the problem of low student achievement for the principals. For, as the achievement of the white students decline the scores of the minority youngsters decline even more.

Over 50% of the elementary principals we interviewed focused on the changing attitudes and motivation of the student population toward school and self as the number one challenge facing their school. Even in the most fortunate towns where the civic leaders have capitalized on the area's natural beauty to strengthen the economy through tourism and to attract wealthy patrons to buy vacation houses, many of the new children in those schools have unskilled and transient parents who serve the tourist industry with low paying jobs and unstable lives. Most principals acknowledge that many of those youngsters are "at risk", they believe that without early intervention those children will become burdens to the society, and most principals expressed compassion for the out-of-school life faced by many of their students, "School is the nicest part of the day for some of these kids."

Challenge #1: Student Motivation, Exemplary Practices

The Case of Sandy. Sandy, a women in her early 40s already in her second principalship, is not only upwardly mobile, but also ambitious. "I want people to recognize me as good," she told us. When we met her, Sandy was the principal of a school in which many families were poor, broken, and living with emotional tension. The growing number of students who needed emotional support could not be handled by the school staff alone. The teachers needed to enlist parent cooperation.

Sandy said, "One of my jobs here is to strengthen the family. Its frightening to me. Maybe we can help train kids to be more resourceful, but we do need some help at home. We work with the kids and parents through discipline; discipline should always be tied to counseling."

Sandy and a committee of teachers created what they called the "Discipline Assignment Sheet". Its format is designed to instruct and counsel both the student and the parent about proper classroom behavior. After a student has misbehaved several times, he or she is given a copy of the Discipline Assignment Sheet to take home. There the student is obliged to complete it in collaboration with the parent. The sheet has seven items:

1. What rule(s) did you break at school?

2. What caused you to break that rule?

3. Why do you think the school has the rule(s)?

4. What would it be like at our school if everyone was allowed to break the rules?

5. What better way could you have solved your problem?

6. In a dictionary look up the following words and write down at least one meaning for each: responsible, self-control, and improve.

7. List three ways you can improve your self-control and be more responsible at school.

Sandy and the committee members felt very good about the impact of their Discipline Assignment Sheets. Not only had student motivation toward learning improved, but also many more parents than usual were showing interest in the school. Also, the items on the assignment sheets were being used by most teachers in the school to guide periodic classroom discussions about rules and discipline. Sandy told us, "the procedure has had the dual advantage of getting our staff to be more consistent about discipline, and of getting our parents to act more supportive toward the staff and the school program."

The Case of Jack. In another small-town district, the superintendent, Jack, was encouraging his principals to take initiative in responding to the challenges of changing students. Like Sandy and her colleagues, Jack thought that the teachers needed to recognize how important it is to work closely with parents. He urged the principals to encourage their teachers to extend their teaching roles beyond the classroom.

Jack thought about it this way, "It's an attitudinal or philosophical thing for our staff. Schools are no longer just for kids 5 to 18. Sometimes it is too late already by the time we get them at 5. We have a social worker, parents get training from very early on. Some folks are getting upset saying its not our business to do this, that we are stepping on the toes of the family. But whose responsibility is it? What do we do when the family doesn't work? It's not the kids fault."

Jack's district was trying to provide services for parents even before their youngsters came to school. The Counselor at the high school offered a parenting course to parents with preschoolers. The district's part-time social worker made home visits to help parents prepare their kids for school. A Special program, two half-days a week, was designed for four-year-olds in the community, and the primary teachers wrestled with a new curriculum in conflict resolution.

Challenge #2: Teacher Improvement, Current Realities

Here are some quotes from elementary principals we interviewed about their frustrations in working on teacher improvement.

-- "My largest problem is correcting a teacher. Correcting them for things like making sure they are in the room on time is easy. It's when they are not getting along with a student and you know it's a "personality clash" and it's partly the teachers fault, like when you know there isn't a good-feeling tone in the class."

-- "We can't attract young, fresh minds at this location. We take whatever we can get. This year we hired 16 non-certified people in our district."

-- "Teachers are our own worst enemy. Its hard to get rid of poor teachers, even during probationary times we have trouble."

-- "The legislature has come down too hard on teachers. It forced us to use a new teacher-appraisal system based on Madeline Hunter. The teachers don't have a good taste in their mouths about it. We have to go in unannounced and if they are on career ladder their money is tied to my appraisal. The appraisal only shows me what they <u>can</u> do, not what they <u>do</u> do."

-- "Our teachers are overloaded. We need to reduce the pressure from the onslaught of new curriculum. I think teachers verge on burn-out. They are growing hungry and tired, even in this isolated little town."

The improvement of teaching was the most heralded objective of educational reform in the 1980s. The President of the United States, The Secretary of Education, and governors and legislators alike have been pointing the finger of responsibility at teachers for the poor quality of education in our classrooms. School districts nationwide are being pressured to retain only the best teachers and to

replace the rest with new, more capable neophytes. In many of the small-towns we visited, however, the superintendents and principals were having a hard time hiring and retaining good teachers. Only people who had grown up in small towns, and who wanted to live in them, would apply for the openings. Many would leave, however, after only a year or two for greener pastures.

During the 1980's the numbers of college students majoring in business and accounting tripled while those majoring in education declined. Moreover, with expanding economies in the sun-belt states, many of the education majors spurned the low salaries in teaching to work for business firms. Those still searching for teaching jobs were drawn to the suburbs and cities of the Sunbelt for reasonable salaries and desirable living arrangements. Just as other professionals fled from small-town America so did many of our best young teachers.

Two districts, in relatively isolated parts of the country, had created exemplary practices for encouraging teacher improvement against great odds. We were impressed with how much they were doing with so little money.

Challenge #2: Teacher Improvement, Exemplary Practices

The Case of Bill. Bill had grown up in a small town and had always sought to return to one. Upon graduating from college, however, he decided to "go for the excitement and money" of the big city. He lasted only two years and then became a six-grade teacher in a small-town. Ten years later he became principal of that elementary school.

The spring we met Bill his community was celebrating its 100th anniversary and his school was planning its fifth summer institute. Bill, his superintendent, and his fellow principals has brought an emphasis on staff development to their isolated district. By scrimping on pay for substitute teachers and with a small grant from the state department, Bill and his colleagues were bringing in resource people from the county office of education and the state college to run a summer institute for the teachers. The teachers were attending the summer institutes free and were given credits on the district salary schedule.

Bill had engaged his teachers in deciding upon the topics for the forthcoming institute. They were interested to learn more about cooperative learning and how to teach writing skills in the elementary grades. A few of the

teachers, who were working on their masters' degrees, were able to obtain university credit. One teacher we interviewed praised the summer institutes as "a great way to bring new ideas to our district." Another summed up her colleagues' sentiments when she commented, "Here we are in the boondocks and feel like we know the cutting edge issues in education."

The Case of Pam. Pam had been the principal of her K-6 school for five years. Although she thought the social-emotional climate of her staff was supportive, she was frustrated by how isolated the teachers were. Each of her 20 teachers taught alone in his or her classroom all day long and every day of the week. She wanted her teachers to be less isolated from one another and to learn more about what was going on in one another's classes.

In reflecting on how she got started, Pam told us, "There was a lot of creative teaching going on, particularly in about 1/3 of the classrooms, but only I, as the supervisor, knew anything about it. I would mention some of the things that my innovative teachers were doing at faculty meetings, but nothing really happened from that. Then, I read an article by Beverly Showers about 'peer coaching.' A light bulb switched on in my head and I decided to try it."

Pam first approached her most secure and competent teachers; she asked four teachers, in particular, to volunteer to try peer coaching. Other teachers began to tune in on the new practice when the original four expressed enthusiasm for peer coaching at a faculty meeting. Another eight teachers joined in during the second year and four more joined in during the third year.

When we visited the school all but four teachers were paired off in "coaching dyads." Not only were the teachers learning about alternative teaching methods by observing one another, but they were also exploring new ways of cooperating with one another on curriculum development.

Challenge #3: Effective Staff Involvement, Current Realities

Before setting out to study small-town school districts, we expected to find the most exemplary examples of staff involvement in the elementary schools. We thought that elementary principals, moreover, would have staff communication as one of their highest priorities. The reality we found was that only 15 of the 38 principals we studied could be labeled democratic administrators.

One principal who was clearly striving to be a democratic administrator told us, "I began a faculty advisory committee. Each two grades has an elected representative. It's the best thing I have ever done and I've been a principal for over 10 years. I learned about it at a Principals' Academy. Why didn't I do this before? It would have saved me lots of grief."

But, just as frequently, we listened to principals who were: Casual , e.g., "I'm not authoritarian but I don't have any formal channels either. If I have a full faculty meeting, it's less than once a month. Most communication is in the hallways or lounge," or authoritarian, e.g., "I meet once a month with grade levels. We have a general faculty meeting once a month. I tell them what they need to know and they do what they need to do," or Laissez-faire, e.g., "Teachers don't like meetings so I don't call them. I just stay out of their way. They are the professionals; they know what to do."

Through our interviews and observations, we searched for how regular and routine the principals' communications were with their faculties. We also tried to discover to what extent and with what satisfaction the teachers were participating in school-wide decisions. Our analysis gave rise to four leadership styles, as follows:

1) The Democratic style provides regular and routine avenues for faculty communication and facilitates teachers' participation in school-wide decision making.

Democratic principals provided regular and routine communication with teachers in a variety of ways. For instance, faculty meetings were held regularly once a week or twice a month, an active committee structure was in place involving most teachers, and the principal visited most classrooms at least once a week. The 15 democratic principals expected their teachers to participate directly, both as individuals and as a faculty, in the decisions that affected them.

2) The Casual Style does not provide regular and routine procedures for faculty communication, but does strive to have teachers participate in school-wide decision making.

The casual style was typical of principals of the tiniest schools we visited. One of those schools had five teachers, while two others in isolated rural settings, had only two teachers each. The teachers would meet informally virtually every day; even when they taught in separated

classrooms, they worked collaboratively during recesses, lunch, and before and after school. We categorized three principals as casual.

3) The Authoritarian Style provides regular and routine avenues for unilateral communications with the faculty, but does not engage the teachers in participatory decision making about school-wide matters.

Authoritarian principals communicated with teachers through one-on-one conversations, loud-speaker announcements, memos, and formal faculty meetings. Seldom did the authoritarian principals engage teachers in informal conversations in the lounge, hallways, or classrooms. An outspoken kindergarten teacher spoke about her principal in this way, "What voice do we have? Ha! None. We have a dictatorship in this building. This principal is just like my Dad was, that's the age they learned this stuff. If you don't like the captain, go on a different ship." We categorized 12 principals as authoritarian.

4) The Laissez-Faire Style provides neither regular and routine faculty communication, nor active teacher participation in school-wide decisions. The laissez-faire principal leaves the teachers alone; they are autonomous not only from the principal but usually, too, from one another.

For the most part teachers were not pleased with laissez-faire principals, although the eight principals who we categorized as laissez-faire were not aware of their teachers' frustration. A few teachers thought that their principal's laissez-faire style was just what the doctor ordered. They had seized leadership in the school and were making collaborative decisions without the principal. Most teachers we interviewed, however, were unhappy with their laissez-faire principals. One of them said, "This year we had only one staff meeting. That was the only time to express any common concerns. Any factory that would do that would be bankrupt. People need to work together."

Table I summarizes the four leadership styles, indicating how many principals we visited were categorized into each one.

Insert (Table 1) here

Challenge #3: Effective Staff Involvement, Exemplary Practices

The Case of Howard. Howard at 42 had been the principal of Green Elementary School for three years. Having recently completed a masters' program at a university more than 250 miles away, he was enthusiastic about his staff of 30 teachers and excited about applying some of the concepts and practices he had learned in graduate school.

Howard believed sincerely in the democratic style of school administration. He thought of the teachers as his colleagues and believed that they had as much right to make educational decisions as he did. Because the faculty was rather large for a K-6 school, he initiated an Advisory Council or leadership group, consisting of one teacher at each grade level. To get started the whole faculty met several times to discuss the idea and how it would function. Then, each grade-level group elected its representative to the Council, with the understanding that membership in the Council would rotate annually.

When we visited the school the Advisory Council had existed for two years. It was meeting once or twice a month; the grade-level teams were meeting twice a month on different weeks. Teachers were bringing ideas to the Council via their representatives, and the Council was sending its ideas back to the grade-level teams via the representatives.

All 30 of the teachers and the principal were linked together vertically. In addition, most teachers were linked horizontally because the Advisory Council had initiated three committees made up of one or two teachers from each grade level. Those committees focused on student recognition, teacher improvement, and report cards. Annually, the whole staff held a day-long meeting in August to select members of that year's Advisory Council and half days in each of October and February to monitor how staff communication and decision making were going.

The Case of Mary. Mary was 45 when we met her and had been the principal of her school for two years. The year before we visited her K-6 staff of 22 teachers Mary had attended a conference on staff decision making with her superintendent. Both administrators developed an interest in site-based management at that conference and decided to implement a new decision-making procedure when they returned home.

They sought to clarify the decision-making role, first of the administrators in the district and second, of the staff members at each school. The procedure they used is guided by a matrix in which the columns represent different

jobs or status levels and the rows represent functions about which decision making occurs.

For example, in clarifying the decision-making roles of the district administrators, the columns were board, superintendent, curriculum coordinator, business manager, senior high principal, junior high principal, and elementary principals. In clarifying the decision-making roles in Mary's school, the columns were superintendent, curriculum coordinator, business manager, principal (Mary), leadership team (made up of grade-level representatives), teachers, classified personnel, and students.

The rows of the decision-making matrix for the district administrators were: hiring and firing administrators, hiring and firing classified personnel, hiring and firing teachers, ordering educational materials, determining the bus schedule, approving travel and inservice events, hiring consultants, etc. The rows of the matrix for Mary's school were: hiring and firing teachers, hiring and firing classified personnel, ordering texts, determining the discipline code, approving travel and inservice events, determining the proper forms of parent involvement, determining amounts of homework, changing the report cards, and hiring consultants.

Five kinds of influence are possible: An I stands for "must be informed." I means that position holders must know the results of a decision to take appropriate action. A C stands for "must be consulted." Those with C power should be consulted early enough so that their information can make a difference in the decision. A P stands for "must participate." P means that the position holders must take part in making the decision and that at least a majority vote of all those with P power is necessary before the decision can be final. V stands for "veto power." V means that position holders agreement must be obtained before the decision can be made. Finally, A stands for "Authority to make the decision." Those with A power can make the decision, and others must go along with it.

Mary presented the idea of a decision-making matrix for her school at a staff retreat in the spring. Figure 1 summarizes the group agreements that the staff made at that retreat. Twice a year the staff reviewed how decision-making was going in the school.

Put Figure 1 Here

Summary

Principals of small-town elementary schools face difficult challenges today. In listening to the voices of 38 of them in 25 districts across 21 Western states, we heard frustrations about student motivation, teacher improvement, and staff involvement. They confront discouraged, under-motivated students who receive too little academic or emotional support at home, demoralized, underpaid teachers who receive too little respect and recognition from society, and transient, overworked staffs which participate too little in school-wide matters.

Even in the face of overwhelming odds against working effectively under such conditions, we did find some administrators who were coping successfully with their challenges. There were six in particular, e.i., Sandy who worked collaboratively with her teachers to engage students and parents in improving classroom discipline; Jack who provided home-centered education to parents so that they could support the academic efforts of their children more; Bill who created inservice training opportunities for his teachers with very little money; Pam who initiated a successful peer coaching venture to enhance her teachers' interest in self-improvement; Howard who established an Advisory Council, made up of a teacher representatives elected at each grade level, to foster school-wide communication; and Mary who initiated a useful procedure for clarifying decision making with her staff.

Unfortunately we found too few Sandys, Jacks, Bills, Pams, Howards, and Marys in our visits to small-town America. Along with those six, only nine other elementary principals were even trying to lead democratically. The 23 others we categorized as authoritarian, laissez-faire, and casual.

Now, more than ever, with the prospect of deep economic trouble in perhaps 75% of small-town America, our small-town elementary schools desperately need democratic administrators who can skillfully bring together teachers, students, and parents into a healthy and cooperative community.

Table I

The Number of Principals with each of Four Leader Styles

Principal-Staff Communication	Staff Participation in School-wide Decision: Staff Participates in school-wide decisions		Staff does not Participate in school-wide Decisions	
Communication with staff is regular and routine	1. Democratic		3. Autocratic	
	15	39%	12	32%
Communication with staff is not regular and routine	2. Casual		4. Laissez-fairre	
	3	08%	8	21%

Figure 1

Examples of Decision-Making Roles Agreed Upon by Mary's Staff

Functions	Superintendent	Curriculum Coordinator	Business Manager	Principal (Mary)	Staff Leadership Team	Teachers	Classified Personnel	Students
Hiring New Teachers	V	C	I	V	P	C	I	I
Ordering Textbooks	C	V	I	P	P	C	I	I
The Discipline Code	C	C	I	V	P	P	C	C
Approve Professional Travel and Inservice Events	V	V	C	P	P	C	I	I
Parent Involvement	V	I	I	P	P	C	I	C
Homework Policy	C	C	I	V	P	P	I	C
Hire and fire Classified	V	I	C	A	C	I	I	I
Change Report Cards	V	I	C	A	C	C	I	I

I = Informed
C = Consulted
P = Participate
V = Veto Power
A = Authority